1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
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CHAPTER XV

SOME WIDER IMPLICATIONS

158 182 No student of Haitian institutions can elude a progressively sharpened awareness of the psychological conflict that is being waged within the frame of Haitian society. And though examples of the divergent forces which lie at the root of this conflict have been set forth in the preceding chapters, some of the more important of these may be recalled here.

178 182 595 158 In his social relationships the Haitian is constantly exposed to the demands of a code of morality which requires marriage to be monogamic. Yet the African tradition of polygyny, and the undoubtedly satisfactory arrangements of both an economic and a social nature that can be made under the terms

178 182 771 158 of plural marriage, pull him toward this form. The case is even stronger in the field of religion, which in Haiti is not a thing remote from life, but an intimate part of existence. On the one hand, because of his inheritance of the *loa*, he must meet his obligations toward these ancestral gods of Africa who punish harshly those who fail them, so that he must either continue their traditional worship or learn to know the consequences

[197] of their anger. Yet on the other hand, the priest thunders his maledictions and threats of eternal damnation — in Mirebalais, at least, often in Créole, a language which the peasant can understand — against those of his flock, the vast majority

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of whom are sincere practicing voduists as they are sincere practicing Catholics, who do not put an end to the worship of false gods.

The absence of graphic and plastic arts in Haitian culture, commented upon in a preceding chapter, must also be regarded as a case in point in laying bare the anatomy of this inner conflict of tradition, since it is important to recognize that the suppression of these forms of the prevalent African tradition would seem to have lost to the Haitian an important outlet for the resolution of inner tensions caused by pent-up drives. Even more revealing is the substitution of games of chance for those games of skill which in most African and New World Negro societies are played for their own sake alone—that is, for the prestige accruing to the skillful player. The strain that accompanies this play for stakes, often of no inconsiderable value in terms of the resources of the players, is patent to the most casual observer. The question here arises whether or not the craving for excitement of this kind may not in Haiti be traceable to the inhibition, under slavery, of some of the more gracious forms of African life which there make for social equilibrium. Might it not represent a kind of compensation for the thwarted psychic ease with which a culturally undisturbed people approach their own existence—a state of being which, in contrast, is quite lacking in Haiti?

A singularly illuminating comment upon these manifestations of instability in Haitian life has been made by Dr. J. C. Dorsainvil, who in drawing his conclusion called both upon his own medical training and on his experience of many years as a profound student of his own people. " It has perhaps been insufficiently remarked to what an astonishing degree the Haitian people live on their nerves." [1] As might be expected, he advances a number of possible explanations of the causes that underlie this state of " living on nerves." The wear and tear of life in the tropics is given as one reason; another is the excitement of the *vodun* dances with their frenzy of possession;

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158 while even the hypothesis of an inherited racial psychosis is proposed to account for the phenomenon.

Let us examine these suggestions. An appeal to the natural environment offers but unsure ground, since it is known that not all peoples who live in the tropics experience a comparable psychic strain. Again, if the participation in *vodun* rites and the experience of possession were given as a reason for lack of stability, it would be expected that these changes in behavior would only occur before, during, or shortly after the ceremonies themselves, something that is by no means the case; and, moreover, that this state of "living on nerves" would be shared by all Negro peoples among whom the experience of possession is the commonplace that it is in Haitian peasant religion. This brings us to the suggestion that Haitian mentality may be the product of a racial psychosis. Here it is important to stress that from the point of view of Haitian culture, as from that of Africa, possession as a part of religious experience is both normal and desirable, so that the actions of an individual in such a state are to be judged neurotic only on the basis of standards that are those of a foreign culture. Add to this the fact that it is becoming more and more apparent that skepticism is the only scientifically admissible attitude when the question of referring the behavior of any people to specific racial endowment is raised, and the necessity becomes apparent of seeking other explanations for Haitian psychology than those that have been advanced.

158 19 What, then, of this matter of "living on the nerves"? It is an arresting image for the characteristic instability of attitude and emotional expression found in the Haitian, but in attempting to understand the phenomenon, it would seem that we are on the firmest ground when we look to those historical forces which were considered in the first chapters of this book. Stated in general terms, an explanation might be sought in the influences which cultures in contact bring to bear upon the

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individuals who must meet the demands of two traditions which, in many aspects, are in anything but accord. As regards the Haitian, it must be recognized that the two ancestral elements in his civilization have never been completely merged. As a result, his outwardly smoothly functioning life is full of inner conflict, so that he has to raise his defenses in order to make his adjustment within the historical and cultural combination of differing modes of life that constitute his civilization.

The kind of adjustment that seems to dominate may perhaps best be called *socialized ambivalence*, since, more than any other phrase, it describes this tendency to manifest those rapid shifts in attitude toward people and situations that characterize the responses of the Haitian peasant to such a marked degree that the same man will hold in high regard a person, an institution, an experience, or even an object that has personal significance to him, and simultaneously manifest great disdain and even hatred for it. As outwardly observable, this takes the form of recurring and often rapid changes in behavior toward the object of attention. In attitude, there is vacillation from one emotional tone to another. In its broader implications, as a matter of fact, it is entirely possible that this socialized ambivalence underlies much of the political and economic instability of Haiti, so that, arising from a fundamental clash of custom within the culture, it is responsible for the many shifts in allegiance that continually take place, as it is for the change in attitudes in everyday association.

Since far more detailed studies of individuals must be at hand before the full power of this ambivalent drive can be gauged with any degree of sureness, the problem alone is sketched here. Yet this type of approach cannot but give insight into such occurrences as that of the man whose unwilling possession by the gods of his ancestors was, as described, brought about through the fascination of their forbidden